

7 Memoirs Therapists Think You Should Read

Mental health experts on the stories that helped them and their patients through tough times.

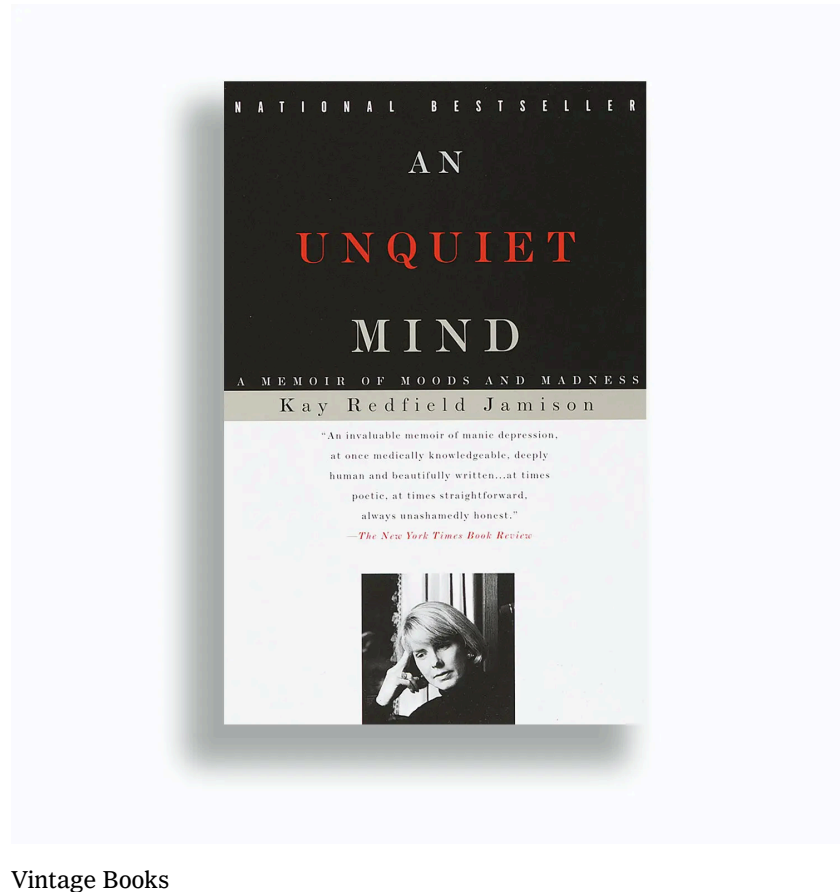
By Louisa Kamps

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Walk into any bookstore and you'll find tables loaded with self-help books for every imaginable problem. But there are times when the wisest advice might be tucked away in the memoir section.

These first-person accounts can provide proof that setbacks are survivable. "The way the narrator makes meaning offers us an invitation to think about the meaning that we've made in our lives," said Jonathan Adler, a professor of psychology at Olin College of Engineering. "It's an invitation to realize that you are interpreting your story, and that you have choices about how you want to do that."

We asked therapists, psychologists and other mental health experts to recommend memoirs that capture what it's like to struggle and find your footing again. Here are seven titles that rose to the top of the list.

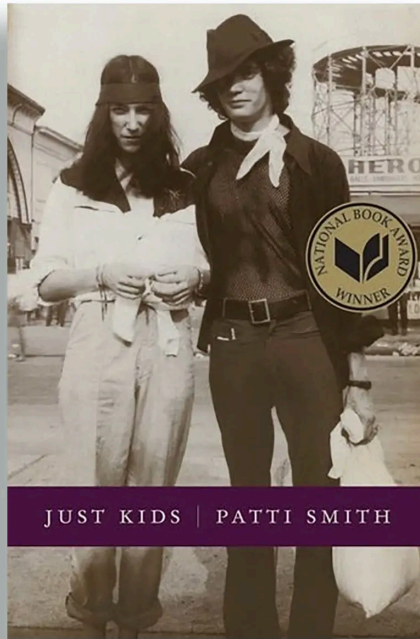


An Unquiet Mind, by Kay Redfield Jamison

Dr. Jamison, a professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, details her experience living with bipolar disorder, or manic-depressive illness, as the condition was known when this memoir was first published in 1995.

She also describes the long “war” she waged against herself by intermittently resisting medication. “It is such an honest report of the struggle to stay in therapy and continue with treatment when the highs of bipolar are so compelling,” said Alexis Tomarken, a therapist in New York City.

Harriet Lerner, a psychotherapist in Lawrence, Kan. and author of “The Dance of Anger: A Woman’s Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships,” said that she often recommends this book to patients with bipolar disorder, but not “when they’re in a fragile or dysregulated state,” since reading the book can be an emotional experience.

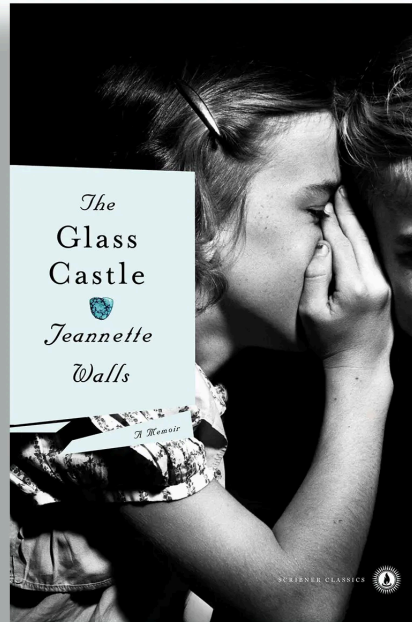


Ecco

Just Kids, by Patti Smith

In this title, the winner of the 2010 National Book Award for nonfiction, Ms. Smith reflects on making her way as a poet, performer and visual artist in New York City in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Broke, unsettled by the political violence of the time and navigating fluid relationships, she occasionally tipped into despair. But she shared a dedication to art with the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe that steadied and fueled her.

“It was inspiring to me, as someone who is not an artist, to see that kind of commitment,” said Ben Endres, a psychotherapist in Milwaukee, who he added that he would recommend this book to anyone trying to break with conventional expectations.



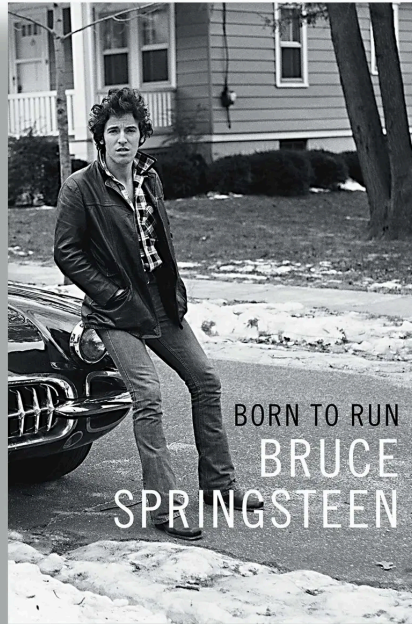
Scribner

The Glass Castle, by Jeannette Walls

Ms. Walls, a novelist and former journalist, recalls her experience growing up in a family where she and her siblings were often forced to fend for themselves.

Ms. Walls's resilience in response to being raised by parents with untreated mental issues "resonated deeply" with Nedra Glover Tawwab, a therapist in Charlotte, N.C., and author of "Drama Free: A Guide to Managing Unhealthy Family Relationships." Seeing someone "go through certain life struggles and be able to have some light at the end of the tunnel is very helpful," she said of the 2005 memoir.

For people who are grappling with family problems, especially difficult sibling dynamics, the book can shed light on how family members can be impacted differently by the same events, she said.

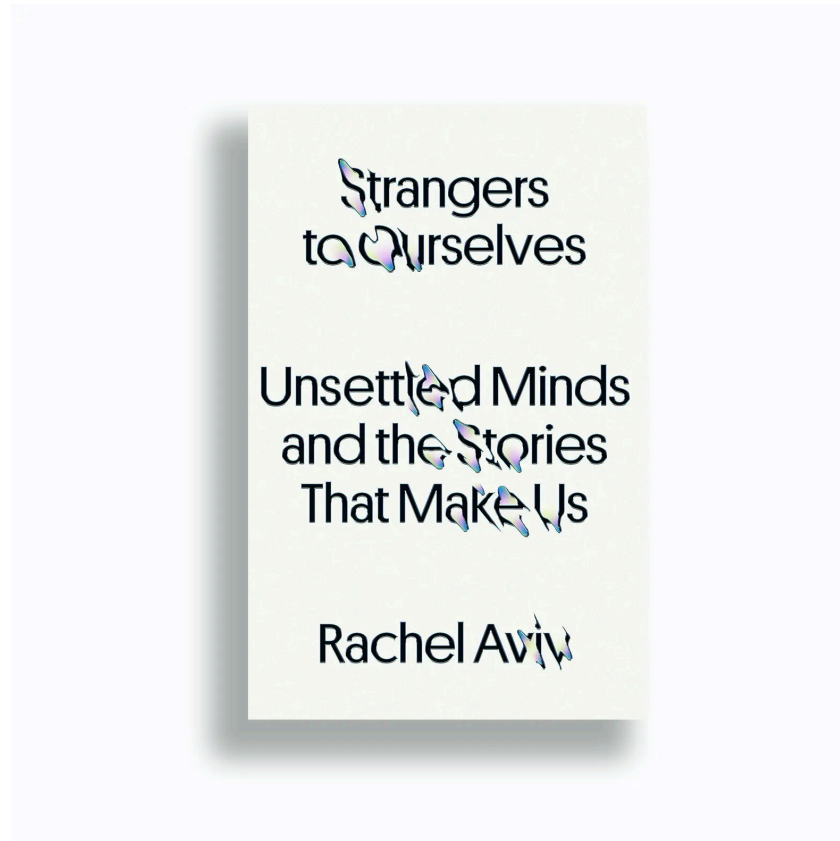


Simon & Schuster

Born to Run, by Bruce Springsteen

In Mr. Springsteen's barreling account of becoming a rock star, he also provides an all-access pass to his decades-long struggles with depression and the considerable care he takes, with the help of medications and ongoing therapy, to maintain his mental health.

Mr. Endres recommended the book, which was published in 2017, for the nonjudgmental way Mr. Springsteen accepts his depression and for his courage when reckoning with other challenges. "He is open about his family dynamics, his emotions and his sexual life in ways that I think help others to understand themselves, even when their experiences are very different from his," Mr. Endres said.

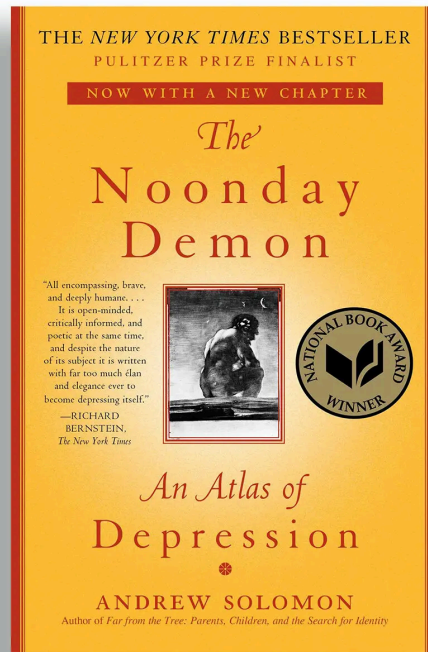


Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Strangers to Ourselves, by Rachel Aviv

In “Strangers to Ourselves,” Rachel Aviv, a staff writer at The New Yorker, parses her history as a psychiatric patient, including the weeks she spent in the anorexia unit of a children’s hospital when she was 6. The identity shift that occurs, inwardly and outwardly, when people receive mental health diagnoses is a central theme of this 2022 title that mixes memoir with stories of others who’ve been treated for severe mental distress.

Ms. Aviv’s book “helps us see how unquestioningly we apply psychiatric language and diagnoses and how reductionistic this can be,” said Dr. Mark Epstein, a psychiatrist and author of “The Zen of Therapy.” It also provides a fascinating look inside the author’s mind during her hospitalization as a young girl and demonstrates how the patience and tolerance of her parents, teachers and therapists facilitated her recovery, he said.

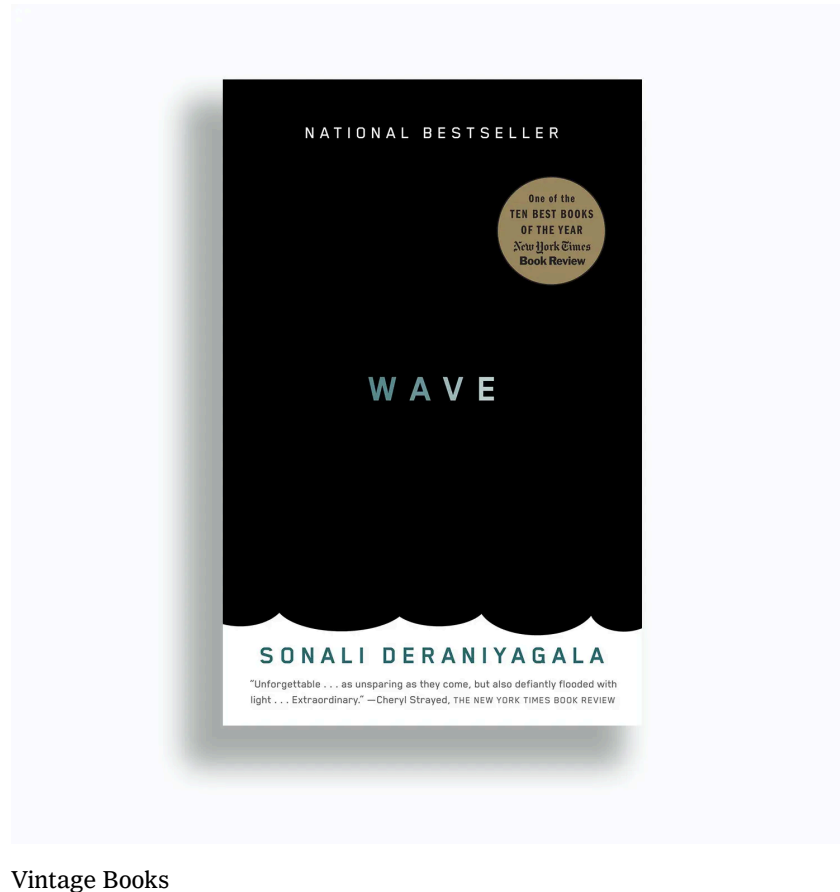


Scribner

The Noonday Demon, by Andrew Solomon

After experiencing his first episode of major depression in his early 30s, Mr. Solomon set out to understand what causes depression and how it's understood and treated around the world. Mr. Solomon, a journalist and essayist, wrote about it all in this far-ranging 2001 memoir, winner of both the National Book Award for nonfiction of the Lambda Literary Award for autobiography/memoir.

“In an encyclopedic way, he went culture to culture, demonstrating that hunger for stories” to help him understand his own experience, Dr. Adler said. “It is revelatory for anyone — and there are many of us — whose lives have been touched” by depression.



Wave, by Sonali Deraniyagala

Ms. Deraniyagala lost her parents, her husband and her two young children in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and writes about the aftermath in her 2013 memoir “Wave.”

The story explores aspects of grief that people “often feel but don’t talk about — the way you can forget for a moment what you have lost, the way you are consumed by it, the chaos and disorganization of it and then the isolation and incapacity for words,” Dr. Tomarken said.

As Ms. Deraniyagala returns to the Sri Lankan beach hotel where she lost her family during their Christmas vacation, and years later, when she visits their London home left virtually untouched since they headed off on that trip, “Wave” explores how light “penetrates and saturates” darkness, against all expectation, Dr. Tomarken said.

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